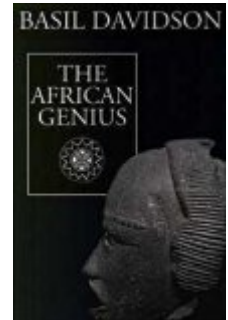


**Basil Davidson.** *The African Genius*. London: James Currey, 2004. 367 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8214-1605-1.



**Reviewed by** Randal Maurice Jelks

**Published on** H-Africa (October, 2007)

In the academy, dominated by scholarly monographs to gain the approval of our fellow academic historians and merit universities' tenure requirements, professors are rarely rewarded for writing synthetic popular history. The literary skill it requires to do so is incredible. And yet, where would the field of African history be without Basil Davidson? Where would I be, when, as an undergraduate in the mid-1970s, I hunted for works that were accessible to me in understanding the rich complexity of the African continent's many histories? I think of all the small college libraries that have nothing but the most outdated materials on the African continent, often with the one exception being Davidson's books. As a popularizer and exponent of African history and its peoples, he continues to be highly readable nearly four decades since the initial publication of the *The Africans* (1969), later to be retitled as *The African Genius*. So, it is wonderful that James Currey and the Ohio University Press have re-issued the book.[1]

Davidson's book is an excellent overview of the many strands and themes of African history.

In just 317 pages, *The African Genius* manages to illustrate the continuity and changes of the continent. The book takes the students right up to the anticolonial period following World War II and into the 1960s; it is strongest in covering the non-Arabic speaking part of the continent. It is still highly relevant as it discusses the centrality of African traditional religions, monarchical structures, Islam's penetration across the Sahara and along the Indian Ocean, and the European scramble for Africa.

Where the book is somewhat dated is in its discussion of African women. Forty years ago, women as historical actors in most history were omitted or simply ignored. This is where Davidson's work can seem a little frayed around the edges. Although the necessary role of women is missing in the text, it still is highly usable in the class as a source to question the prevailing historiography of the late 1960s. Davidson's coverage of the role of women could be an opportunity to give counterpoint to more recent historical works on the topic that give students new--and fuller--insights into African history.

There is an additional benefit to using *The African Genius* in a class. When Davidson wrote it in 1969, scholars, diplomats, and social activists still were positive about the future of the continent, even with the growing prevalence of African military governments. One only has to note that the book was dedicated to the Amilcar Cabral, the nationalist leader in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau. In 1969, as opposed to now, there was still hope for the long term future of the various nation-states of Africa. In this regard it could be interesting to use Howard French's *A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and the Hope* (2004), which is more pessimistic, in contrast to Davidson's more optimistic writing from the 1960s.

Re-reading Davidson's book after many years reminds me of one more thing. We continue to need more highly readable synthetic texts in African history for students. While, as a profession, the focus is on textbooks or niche books for classroom purposes (which are certainly both necessary and valuable for the field and personal academic growth and advancement), it would be nice to see more Africanists take up writing big synthetic books. Davidson books were meant to inform a broad public about a continent he came to love. With all the rich scholarship and interpretation available and yet often inaccessible to the general reading public, is it not time to take up a big book and write a full and vibrant of history of Africa? If you looking for a model go no further than the *The African Genius*.

#### Note

[1]. Also published by Ohio University Press in Athens (2004), \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8214-1605-7.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

**Citation:** Randal Maurice Jelks. Review of Davidson, Basil. *The African Genius*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13709>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.